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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Tuesday, January 7, 1936

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Already in this new year the problems are appearing thick and fast in the mail -- and many of the same old problems, too. "Where are the questions of yesteryear?" as the poet would say. They're right here. Alas, custards have already begun to curdle in 1936 and cream pies have already discouraged their makers by becoming watery. Perhaps we should have suggested a set of cooking resolutions for 1936. That might have helped start the new year's meals in a happier way.

Maybe it's not too late. Maybe we could make some resolutions as we go today. Let's start with the custard. Why, oh, why does custard curdle -- or separate, if you prefer to express it that way? I'll give you 2 good reasons. First, it separates if you cook it at too high a temperature or too long. Second, it sometimes separates if the milk you use is not fresh. If you've been listening, you've often heard me preach the doctrine of a low temperature for milk and egg dishes. If you've been listening, you've heard my cry that salvation for custards only comes from cooking them at a very low temperature. If you are making soft custard on top of the stove, cook it in the upper part of a double boiler over water, and see that that water underneath doesn't boil -- keep it at the simmering point. When the soft custard coats the spoon, it's done and should leave the stove at once. As for baked custard, here again you'll only save it from separating if you cook it in a low oven. Set the dish of custard in a pan of water in the oven. Besure that the water never gets hot enough to boil. Remove the custard from the oven when set.

Which brings me to Resolution No. 1 for the Year 1936. Resolved: To cook all milk and egg dishes at low or moderate temperature.

Now a postcript about custard. I mentioned using milk that is fresh for making it. Probably you know that milk which is on the verge of "turning" will separate quickly when you heat it. Then, try as you will, you can't make a successful custard of it. And you can't make good white sauce, or cocoa, or cornstarch pudding or oyster stew either.

Which brings me to Resolution No. 2. Resolved: To use milk that is fresh -- or freshly opened canned milk -- for all dishes where the milk is heated.

So much for the first question. Now let's go on to the cream-pie question. I'd like to read you this pitiful cream-pie letter exactly as it came to me. "Dear Aunt Sammy: The other night we had company -- some people I wanted to impress with my good cooking. So I went to great pains to make a cream pie

with a graham cracker crust. I have made it many times before. It is my husband's favorite dessert. Well, the pastry was perfect. The cream filling thickened to suit me exactly. The meringue came out of the oven firm, fluffy and light brown. I felt very satisfied with my cooking ability when I set that pie in the refrigerator to chill a few hours before serving. But when I took it out at dessert time what a sight met my eyes! The cream filling had become thin as it stood in the refrigerator. When I tried to serve the pie, it ran all over the plate. The dinner was spoiled for me. Please tell me what went wrong, and why."

Well, that was one time when the refrigerator played a mean trick on a good cook. The trouble was that the cornstarch filling couldn't stand up under the sudden chill in the refrigerator. The extremely cold temperature "broke down the jell," as the experts would say. Next time you serve cream pie, better make it in the morning and let it cool gradually on the kitchen shelf at room temperature. Don't try to serve it ice cold. What about making it the day before? No, sometimes standing that length of time even at room temperature tends to thin the cornstarch filling.

There's another resolution idea. Resolved: Never to give too much of a chill to any dish thickened with cornstarch, and never to let such a dish stand too long.

Now what shall we say to the listener who says her life is blighted by one great cooking problem -- lumps. Lumps in her gravy, lumps in her cream sauce, lumps in her soup? Lady, you need to know the ways of the starch granule and your troubles will be over. Put a granule of dry starch in the presence of heat and moisture and it expands. Put a lot of starch granules together in the presence of heat and moisture and those on the outside surface expand first and leave those on the inside in a dry raw lump. So whenever you are using flour or other starch for thickening, be sure the granules are evenly separated somehow. The best way to keep them separate is to mix them with some other cold ingredient before they come in contact with heat and moisture. You can blend your flour with a little cold liquid -- make it into a thin smooth paste -- before it goes into a hot liquid. Or you can blend it with fat. Or with sugar. It all depends on what dish you are making. The idea is to get those starch granules thoroughly separated before they start cooking and swelling.

Resolution Number 4: To avoid lumps in cooking by separating starch granules thoroughly before you add them to any hot mixture.

Here's a letter from a young housekeeper who says she's mixed up about soup-making. "Should I soak a soup bone in cold water," she asks, " or in boiling water to draw out flavor? And should the water have salt in it or not?" Cold water tends to draw out juices, say the good cooks of all time. Salt tends to draw out juices. So if you soak soup bone a while before cooking it, soak in cold lightly salted water. Then, cook that bone by gentle simmering for hours to draw out all possible flavor.

Last resolution for today: Make soups and stews and pot roasts at simmering temperature and use a little salt in the cooking water.

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